MOBILITY FOR LOWER FUNCTIONING
YOUNG DEAF BLIND ADULTS

LILLI NIELSEN

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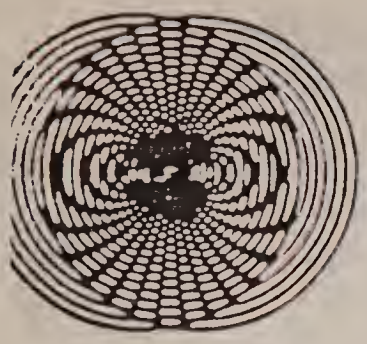

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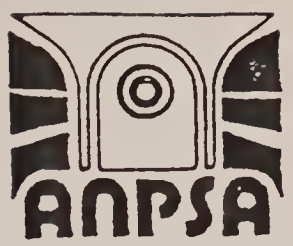

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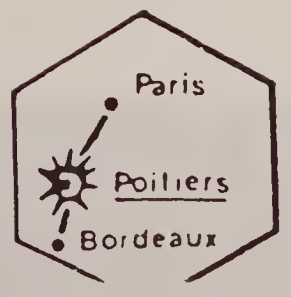

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MOBILITY FOR LOWER FUNCTIONING YOUNG DEAF-BLIND

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Moblility for Lower Functioning Young Deaf Blind Adults

Ladies and gentlemen,

Mobility means the state or quality of being mobile - of being able to move.
However, what is lower functioning ?
Where the level of functioning is concerned deaf bling youngsters are a very mixed group. Some are functioning at a very low level because they suffer from mental retardation also while others are like this because of lack of early stimulation or because they have developes autistic-like behaviour which has become a barrier for improvments in all fields of development.
From these brief descriptions ir is obvious that the problems of mobility for lower functioning deaf blind youngsters are very complicated and must be considered from differnt points of view.
In this paper I would like to deal with those who never move from where they are placed and those who actually are able to walk but are using this ability only when a caregiver initiates and guides the walking.

The group of Deaf Blind Unable to Move Around

Often the deaf blind from this group are observed as being very passive ; they do not search for objects, they only perform very few movements, they seldom use their hands simultanously, they prefer to lie down even if they are able to sit without support ; many of them are occupied with some stereotyped behaviour with theit own body.
Watever reason there may be for their low function thes deaf blind are in my opinion totally ignorant of the outside world : they have no knowledge at all about spatial relationships.
The object wich now and then is given to them exists only as long they have it in their hand and even then the deaf blind child acknowledges only that part of the object which touches him physically.
When talking about youngsters of today we have to realize that the low functioning deaf blind youngsters during their childhood have been given very little stimulation. When they were young children no one paid very much attention to the possibility of helping them to develop. Yes, certainly, parents and other caregivers did what they could, but often these children were considered are ineductable.
Nevertheless, some have been trained and guided with the expectation that they would be able to understand something about the outside world and that they would be able to cope with some daily living skills.

The methods used for teaching them have been the traditional ones and the outcome is that trhey are still unable to move from where they are placed.

What could these youngsters possibly have missed ?
The first condition of achieving the ability to move around is for the deaf blind person like all other human beings to learn about the environment nearrest to him.

The methods which have been used in the training of the deaf-blind were of course based on this view bit since these youngsters are still unable to move around we may put the question :
What else could have beeen done and what can be done now when the deaf blind person is still young ?

I believe that what these deaf blind youngsters have missed is the opportunity to learn from their own activities. If we gave them some surroundings free from any caregiver where they could achieve some new results from their movments, then maybe would achieve some knowledge about spatial relationships which would motivate them to move around. Such knowledge would give the pupil a frame of refernce about spatial relationships which would enable him to gain more from training.

However, I also believe that it depends on the kind of materials and surroundings we give the pupil to motivate him to make the experiments and explorations which can form the basis for further development.

If we give the deaf-blind child an environment which is equipped with different materials placed as near his hands as possible, it will enable him to experience different responses from the effects of the movements he performs. He will probably be motivated towards making additional new movements.

From observations of such situations we could learn wich materials he prefers and wich experiments he performs.
I believe that we would find that he prefers to be touching surfaces with acute points, manipulating materials whose form could be changed, experimenting with vibrating materials, producing vibrations by pushing one object towards another and by banging objects against the floor, table or wall - we must remember that every sound has its vibration.

Instead of passively waiting for experience of emerging vibrations made by other people when they walk or handle differnt tools deaf blind pupils should rather be encouraged to make vibrations themselves. That would give them a frame of reference for the understanding of relationships between objects and vibration and helping them to understand that some vibrations are made by themselves and some ,are made by other people.

To reinforce the experience of vibration I would like to suggest that the pupil is given a resonance-platform. A resonance-platform is made of 4 m/m plywood, and raised off the ground by a 2 cm x 2 cm rim of wood attached to the underside perimeter of the plywood. If used for a larger pupil lying sitting on the floor it normally measures 150 cm x 150 cm. If used on a table it measures 50 cm x 50 cm. The resonance-platform reinforces every sound and therby the vibrations which the pupil makes with any activity with objects.

If he is left alone with his experiments I am sure that he would learn that he is the producer of the vibrations. Then he would probably begin to compare different tactile and vibrating experiences and begin to combine the activities in different ways. If he is given an environment with materials of different qualities he would learn bout quality. If some of the materials are present in two or three identicat forms he would learnabout quantity. If he is allowed to repeat an activity with the intervals of time chosen by himself he would lr-earn something about time.

Gradually he would perform some activities in certain patterns and he would learn the precise of several objects. In other words he would achieve understanding of some spatial relationships which would motivate him to move around. To move around oneself is quite another experience from being moved around.

The Group of Deaf Blind who are Unable to Walk Unless Guided

In this paper I have grouped deaf blind youngsters. I have done this from practical reasons although I consider everyone of them as an unique individual with his own very special experience gained from the environment where he has grown up.
No two sighted children are alike ; every family what they are. However, siblings perform movements such as reaching and walking as well all the different daily living skills.
The blind one is even more unique than he sighted one. As the blind child misses all the information based on sight, he develops his own habits, his own signs, his own conclusions from what he experiences.
The blind one who is also deaf has only very little possibility of learning from imitation, so he becomes even more unique than he sighted and the blind ones.
Therfore, the reasons why some of the deaf blind children who are able to walk but unwilling to use this ability unless guided could be many.
One of the reasons may be that the deaf blind child has concluded that people do not walk without holding somebody's hand, that people do not walk without being guided. If the pupil for 15 to 20 years has experienced that every time he goes from one place to another he holds someones hand, then his conclusion could easely be that no one walks without holding someones'hand. During my work I have met several blind children and young people who actuelly had made that conclusion.
Another reason may be that the deaf blind child has been trained to be able to walk but has neverr learned walking on his own. Several of the blind children I began to work with had been trained in walking ; they were quite capable in walking when guided. In spite of this they later on went through all the steges of the development of walking alone. But they did not start this development until they had begun to move themselves with the purpose of reaching for objects wich they, from their own activities, had learned were nearby. When this ability was acquired they began to practise moving from one room to another using a kind of crawling, then they began to stand up and sit down repeatedly and only then they took one or two steps alone. I think it is though-provoking that a pupil who has been guided in wolking daily

A rope is fastened along the wall with the purpose of helping the pupil to move from one room to another. Although she touches the rope the teacher has to push her a little while she moves. Maybe the rope could be arranged in a more fascinating and encouraging fashion. Why not tie some materials to the rope with intervals of for example half a metre, then the touching of the materials would tell something about the proceedings. Gradually the pupil would learn about the order of the objects giving her some bints about distances. Such ropes could be used both indoors and outdoors.

Maybe some of the deaf blind actually want to walk alone but are not allowed to do so. Maybe parents and other carigivers are too protective towards the pupil, thinking that he must feel insecure unless having physical contact with the carigiver whenever he moves. Or perhaps the carigiver just has the habit of holding the hand of the deaf blind child and therefore does not realize that this is not necessary any longer. Maybe the pupil is unable to explain that he wants to walk alone or perhaps he tries to say this but his signs are interpreted in the wrong way.

However, the reason could also be that the pupil is unable to initiate activities -walking as well as everything else. Maybe he has been trained and guided so much that he has concluded that he is never supposed to be the one who takes any initiative. His experiences during the past years could easely have been that whenever he was actually initiating something there was always someone nearby who interfered by helping him to achieve success
from his initiative, so that the deaf blind child seldom experiencednany success at all.

I am not so sure that we should guide the hands of the deaf blind child all the time.On the contrary, i believe that we should be very critical towards this attitude of ours. Maybe we sould rather consider when it is necessary to guide his hands and avoid to do so in all other situations.
Low functioning means that THINGS TAKE TIME . By guiding the hand all too quickly and all too often we do not give the pupil any opportunity to make his own considerations about how, when, where and why to do this and that.

Before going on I should like to show you a videorecording of a 17 year old deaf blind boy. It shows how he rejects walking whenever the teachers hold his hands. He withdraws his hands and places himseslf sitting on his heels holding his hand closely to his chest. The teachers try to persuade him to walk. They use the sign language for the deaf blind and they take his upper arms pulling him to standing position. Then he begins to walkj and the teachers move their hands to holding his hands - after a few steps he again withdraws his hands and places himself in the above described position. During the entire walk the reactions of both the boy and the teachers are repeated with intervals of 8 - 10 steps.

What does he actually try to tell. I believe that he is saying : "Do not touch my hands. I am the one who must use my hands to express my feelings, I am the one who would like to walk alone." Or maybe he would like to say : "I have to use my hands and arms to keep my balance."

He has benn taught using the sign language for the deaf blind and he has actually succeeded in learning some of the signs. Besides this he has a lot of personal signs. This means that he uses his hands for communicate when someone is grasping his hand all the time. If you blindfold me I would be unable to read my manuscript, if you simultanously hold your hand tight over my mounth I would even be unable to read from memory.

While we are guiding the hand of the deaf blind child or holding his hand because we want to give him security, we are in fact both blindfolding and gagging him. He must use his hands both to talk and to make a tactile search and while walking he must also use his arms to keep his balance. I think that he is the sensible one, he tries to say that he wants to have his hands free. When the teachers have moved their hands to the upper part of his arms he moves to standing position willingly as if he would like to say "Very well, they have understood". Butas soon as he has taken a few steps the teachers move their hands to his hands once more and he once again reacts by sitting down and hiding his hands as if he would like to say "do not take my hands I want to talk about my experience, maybe I do not want to use the language you taught me but I have my own language and when you are holding my hands I am unable to talk and I am also unable to coordinate my walking with the movements of my arms. It is much easier to walk when allowed to use the entire body for it."
When I suggested the teacher that she should allow the boy to walk alone she said : "But he must feel insecure if he is without physical contact. I answered : "He should not be forced to be an infant all his life. Please, do not only present your heart outside your clothes, keep your heart inside your body, then it is easier for you to mix your warm feelings with your mind."

I also suggested her to use a short stick or cane offering him the one end of the stick instead of her hand. Then she could hold the other end of the stick and gradually guiode the pupil less and less until he needs nothing at all. Thereafter the boy could be given the white cane so that he could begin to practise making vibrations from the different surfaces on wich he walks.

The teacher also tryed to get him to jump in a trempoline, without very much success. The teacher stood in front of the boy holding his hands. If she had placed herself at the back of the boy holding him around his chest, then he would have been able to use his arms to keep his balance and to communicate about the jumping, and the teacher would have felt much more secure in her responsability for both the boy and herself; she would have been aware of how much support the boy actually needed - that means that the support could have been decreased giving the boy more and more self-confiidence. From the decreased support he would also have learnt that support can be decreased. Maybe one day he would have removed the hands of the teacher - giving the sign that he wanted to jump without support.

The boy was also expected to find a special object connected with the activity which was intented to be the next activity. There were two objects in a box. He reached for the special object but as he happened to grasp the wrong one the teacher immediately guided his hand to the right one. I am sure that he would have been able to find the right

Many of these pupils are actually trying to get rid of the hands guiding hands all the time. However, they are not doing this by removing the guiding hands but by hiding their own hands. It is my experience that this attitude of hiding hands starts with withdarawl of the hands whenever anyone wants to guide them. In the pupil is still guided he will begin with the attitude of touching every single object for a few seconds only, becoming very restless in the way he handles objects ; this has been interpreted as an inability to concentrate on exploration, but it could just as well be interpreted as avoidance of the hands of the carigiver who so often has interfered and corrected the pupil when he showed interest in some object.

It is of couse necessary to guide their hands and to touch their hands when you want to teach sign language. However, I think it is so important to givethese pupils a way of communinication that we should certainly not destroy this possibility by guiding their hands in all situations where it is unnecessary. The risk from exaggerated guidance of the hands could be that the pupil during the 50 years of adult life would use all his energy ti hide his hands, to refuse sign language and to avoid getting in touch with his surroundings and I do not believe that the lower functioning deaf-blind youngster can be expected to be mobile unless he is interested in his surroundings.

As traditional teaching, training and guiding seem to have given insuffiscient results I think the time has come to declare : "The methods we used were based on our initiatives ; <u>we</u> guided the pupil, <u>we</u> decided what he should do, <u>we</u> decided how and when he should do so and so. However, all our efforts given from a good heart have not given the expected result ; maybe we should try another approach."

The deaf-blind youngster has still a lifetime ahead in wich he or she can experience, explore and learn.

May 1987.

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